

The Fish and Game Commission

Many Californians are not fully aware of the identity, function or responsibilities of the California Fish and Game Commission, and consider it synonymous with the California Department of Fish and Game. Actually, the Commission is a separate entity that has been involved in the management and wise use of California's fish and wildlife resources since 1870.

It is composed of up to five members, appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate. The Commissioners are not full-time State employees, but individuals involved in private enterprise with expertise in various wildlife-related fields. They have a staff of eight employees, which handle day-to-day administrative activities. The Commission meets in public at least eleven times each year to discuss various proposed regulations, permits, licenses, management policies and other subjects within its areas of responsibility. It also holds a variety of special meetings to obtain public input on items of a more localized nature, requests for use permits on certain streams or establishment of new ecological reserves.

Between 1870 and 1940, individual Commissioners served at the pleasure of the Governor. In 1940 the people provided for a Fish and Game Commission in the state constitution. The Legislature delegated to the Commission a variety of powers, some general in nature and some very specific. A major responsibility is the formulation of general policies for the conduct of the Department, and the Director is responsible for administering the Department's activities in accordance with these policies. This is the only area in which the Commission is directly involved in Department administration. Its policies concern fisheries and wildlife management, introduction of exotic species, use of departmentally-administered land and a variety of other subjects.

Probably the best known responsibility of the Commission is its general regulatory power, with which it decides seasons, bag limits and methods of take for game animals and sport fish. In adopting hunting (biennially—even-numbered years) and sport fishing regulations (biennially—odd-numbered years), the Commission, in each case, holds a series of open public meetings (three for hunting and four for sport fishing) located in various parts of the state, so that individual and group input can be received and considered prior to adoption of new or changed regulations.

Some have criticized the Commission's regulatory actions as being nothing more than a rubber stamp for the Department's recommendations. A review of the Commission's actions on various Department recommendations indicates that this is not the case. In many instances, the Commission rejects or substantially modifies actions recommended by the Department, but only where it is convinced that such action is in the best interest of the resource and truly reflects the wishes and needs of the people. It is only natural that the Commission often relies heavily on the Department's biological data and

recommendations, since the Department has the largest staff of experts for compiling data on California's wildlife.

Just as the Commission often acts independently of the Department, it can also act independently of individual stakeholders, such as hunting interests. Claims that the Commission is only concerned with consumptive uses of our resources are refuted by the facts. Actually, the Commission

spends more of its time dealing with matters of environmental quality, additional species protection, and rehabilitation of depleted populations and habitat than it does with matters of consumptive use. This by no means implies that the Commission is totally protectionist-oriented. It is fully aware that optimum use of our renewable wildlife resources must provide for a variety of consumptive and nonconsumptive needs. Wildlife, in contrast with inanimate objects, cannot be stored indefinitely for future use. Seasons and bag limits established on species with adequate

reproductive potential reflect the best use of a biological surplus. In these cases, there always is prior provision for ample breeding stock and for a continuing population which can be enjoyed by naturalists, photographers and other nonconsumptive users.

The Commission's powers become increasingly broad as the Legislature gives it further regulatory and management authority. It is clear that the Commission, which can rapidly and expertly deal with resource problems, is often a more effective means of meeting the needs of the people and the resource than is the relatively slow process of legislative change. Coupled with this is an increasing awareness by the Legislature and all Californians that sound species management demands complete control over total use, and that one body, such as the Commission, is the most effective vehicle for controlling all forms of consumptive use—both sport and commercial.

There is sometimes a feeling among the Commissioners that they are greatly overloaded with work and responsibility for their \$100-daily, not to exceed \$500-monthly, maximum compensation. Still, the Commission continues working as a group of dedicated and intensely interested individuals, who fully realize their enormous responsibilities. As they rely on the Department for biological data and expertise, they also rely on all other Californians for recommendations, suggestions and constructive criticism of proposed actions.

The Commissioners' ultimate decisions must reflect not only the biological needs of our fish and wildlife, but also the wishes, needs and desires of all those who enjoy these resources. This is not an easy course to follow, and frequently it leads to conflicts between various interest groups. However, with the interest, understanding and involvement of everyone who appreciates our magnificent fish and wildlife resources, the California Fish and Game Commission will continue along the path of sound and enlightened resource management.



Commission deputy Knukle checks on take of clams at Pismo Beach in 1928.